R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 020 180 TE 000 478

HELL IN NEW YORK, J. D. SALINGER'S "PRETTY MOUTH AND GREEN MY EYES".

BY- HAMILTON, KENNETH

PUB DATE 67

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.36 7P.

DESCRIPTORS- *AMERICAN LITERATURE, *ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, *LITERARY ANALYSIS, *SHORT STORIES, *LITERATURE, LITERARY CRITICISM, FICTION, SYMBOLS (LITERARY), FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE, J.D. SALINGER,

THIS SALINGER STORY OF "DECEIT-WITHIN-DECEIT" IS A MORAL CONDEMNATION OF SOCIETY. ARTHUR, AWARE OF HIS WIFE JOANIE'S INFIDELITY, CANNOT OBJECT BECAUSE IN HIS BUSINESS LIFE HE IS DEPENDENT ON LEE, HER LOVER, FOR PROTECTION FROM "JUNIOR." ARTHUR'S DESPAIR IS NOT COMPLETE, HOWEVER, SINCE HE GAINS A MORAL VICTORY BY USING HIS IMAGINATION, A QUALITY WITH WHICH LEE CANNOT COPE. IMAGERY, THE KEY TO TRUTH IN THE STORY, INVOLVES THE COLORS OF WHITE AND ROSE (SYMBOLIC OF JOANIE'S PREVIOUS PURITY) AND REFERENCES TO ANIMALS (SYMBOLIC OF HER PRESENT STATE). FURTHER, ARTHUR IS CALLED AN "ABSOLUTE CHILD" DUE TO HIS POETIC IMAGINATION, WHEREAS JOANIE IS A "GROWN CHILD," AN ADULT UNAWAKENED TO REALITY AND SPIRITUAL VALUES. MOREOVER, THE ALLUSION TO "JUNIOR" EXPANDS TO INCLUDE CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD. AT THE END OF THE STORY, LEE REALIZES THAT IT IS HIS SITUATION THAT IS HOPELESS SINCE HE IS IN THE HELL OF THOSE WHO DEAL IN APPEARANCES AND CANNOT LOVE, WHILE ARTHUR, HAVING DECIDED TO GO TO SEE JUNIOR, HAS GAINED NEW HOPE. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "DALHOUSIE REVIEW," VOL. 47 (AUTUMN 1967), 394-399.) (JS)

ED020180

DALHOUSIE REVIEW

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY C. L. Bennet, editor and Kenneth Hamilton TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

C. L. BENNET, *Editor*

M. G. PARKS, *Associate Editor*

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

President H. D. HICKS (Chairman), ZILPHA LINKLETTER (Secretary), J. H. AITCHISON, A. R. BEVAN, J. B. HIBBITTS, A. L. MURPHY, F. H. PAGE, P. B. WAITE.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

C. B. HAVEY (President), C. L. BENNET, H. BRYNJOLFSON, F. M. FRASER, H. D. HICKS, ZILPHA LINKLETTER, R. S. MORTON, H. M. PORTER, G. B. ROBERTSON.

D. H. MCNEILL, *Secretary-Treasurer.*

G. R. GEORGE, *Business Manager.*

THE DALHOUSIE REVIEW

Invites contributions in prose or in verse from both new and established writers. Manuscripts should not exceed 5,000 words in prose, 300 in verse. They should be typewritten on standard-size paper and double-spaced except for quoted matter, and footnotes should be numbered consecutively and typed together at the end of the article. All manuscripts should be accompanied by an addressed envelope and return postage in Canadian stamps or International Reply Coupons. Editorial correspondence should be addressed to The Editor, *The Dalhousie Review,* Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada. Correspondence regarding advertising and subscriptions should be addressed to the Business Manager, *The Dalhousie Review,* at the same address.

TE 000 478

The contents of *The Dalhousie Review* are listed in the *Canadian Index,* Canadian Library Association, Ottawa. *The Dalhousie Review* is authorized as second class mail by the Post Office Department, Ottawa, and for payment of postage in cash.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Kenneth Hamilton

HELL IN NEW YORK: J. D. SALINGER'S "PRETTY MOUTH AND GREEN MY EYES"

Nine Stories[1] contains some of the most imaginative and technically expert of J. D. Salinger's work. Its opening story, "A Perfect Day for Bananafish", introduces in dramatic fashion Seymour Glass, who has been the focus of most of the author's recent fiction. Other stories in the collection—notably "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut" and "For Esmé—with Love and Squalor"—have been taken by critics as concise guides to his main themes. The purpose of this essay is to look at one of the stories that has received less attention than others but which, nevertheless, is an excellent example of the brilliance of Salinger's art.

"Pretty Mouth and Green My Eyes" has some of the marks of a trick story in the O. Henry tradition, and this may be the reason why it has received less attention than it merits. It features two characters: a grey-haired man whose name is later revealed to be Lee, and his companion in bed—referred to simply as "the girl". Lee has two telephone conversations with a business subordinate, Arthur, following a party which both had attended earlier that night. Arthur is worried because his wife Joanie has not returned home, and the first conversation is taken up with Arthur's account of Joanie's faithless, immature, and vain nature and the failure of their marriage. In the second conversation Arthur announces that Joanie has come back safely and expresses confidence that their marriage can yet be salvaged. The reader is left on the note of Lee's stunned surprise, clinching the point that the girl in his bed is certainly Joanie.

Whatever else may be obscure about this story of deceit-within-deceit, the moral condemnation that Salinger pronounces upon the society within which the characters spend their lives is plain beyond doubt. Arthur suggests two routes of escape from the "rat race". When despairing of his marriage, he speaks of going back to the uncomplicated routine of the army. Later, on the supposition that he and Joanie can patch things up, he proposes getting "a little place in Connecticut maybe", where Joanie can indulge her taste for

TE 000 478

"plants and all that stuff". Living in New York, he explains, undermines even normal people after a while.

However, the abnormality of twentieth-century urban existence seems to be more pervasive and harder to escape than Arthur's words would suggest. His hope for the future sounds hollow. Was it really hope and not merely self-mockery, the reader wonders, since Joanie had not come home and her husband had evidently guessed where she really was? The cruel truth about Arthur's position is that he dare not object to being deceived and cuckolded, that he has to pretend to be grateful for Lee's hypocritical and patronizing show of friendship, and that he must co-operate in building the edifice of lies perpetuating the unnatural condition in which they are immersed. His job depends upon keeping Lee flattered sufficiently to gain his protection from the wrath of "Junior" when he makes a mistake. And one of his reasons for phoning Lee in the first place was to confess that he had just lost an important lawsuit involving three hotels that his firm was managing. (As many hotels as characters in the story, we may note!) Thus Salinger unfolds for us the map of a universe ruled by the anti-virtues of faithlessness, fear, and lust.

This story stands alone among Salinger's writings in portraying the business world and those who serve its interests. It is almost as though, having looked into hell and reported what he saw there, the author either could not bring himself to look again, or else believed that he should not: simply to know that such a realm of despair exists was enough, and more than enough. Nevertheless, this is not a story of total despair. Salinger is not just painting a picture of a net of evil in which the strong and the weak are alike caught and destroyed. Rather, there is a glimpse given of an inward world which reverses the values of the outward one. During the first phone call, Lee seems to have the calm of strength as Arthur confesses to weakness and failure. Even when Arthur proposes coming over to see him he is fully in command of the situation; and, with a display of friendly concern, he refuses to agree with Arthur's moans about being a nuisance and deserving to be cut off. Yet, on the second call, Lee confesses to a sudden headache as an excuse for hanging up. Somehow, Arthur's unexpected lie has caught him without a counter-lie ready, so that he loses his poise to the extent of allowing his cigarette to slip from his fingers on to the bed. Somehow, the pathetic dupe and victim has gained a moral victory, while his tormentor has become the tormented.

The clue to Salinger's story is in the imagery, as it always must be in a work of literary art. The literary artist does not focus upon plot, which is

merely a framework, or even upon moral judgment, but upon imaginative truth. Salinger usually underlines this by making his heroes poets, either in intention or in performance. The present story runs true to form, since it takes its title from a poem that Arthur wrote out of his early love for Joanie: "Rose my color is and white, / Pretty mouth and green my eyes." In his disillusionment Arthur admits that Joanie's eyes are not green; they are "like goddam *sea* shells." Yet Joanie remains his precious link with the world of imagination, continuing to fire his almost extinct poetic vision. Ordinary facts connected with her are at once transmuted into symbols. Thus, whenever he is sure they ought to part, "she comes in with those goddam white *gloves* on or something." She used to be a flower of purity—rose and white. Now her hands are soiled by a dirty world, and yet on her the gloves she wears give a promise that hands can be clean again. Similarly, he treasures the memories of her efforts to prove her love when they were first married: how she held the flashlight while he mended a flat on the road to New Haven; and how she bought him a suit, a little too big. She might still be the light of his life when existence has gone flat. She might still ride with him to a new haven of happiness. She might once more measure him with an affection that sees him as greater than he actually is, an affection that, in spite of maladjustments, makes him believe he is *suited* to be hers. In his anger over her promiscuity he calls her an animal. On Lee's replying that we are all animals he makes his one spirited rejoinder. He may be a "stupid, fouled-up twentieth-century son of a bitch," he asserts, but he is no animal and will not be called one.[2] The vehemence of his confidence at this point seems out of character in one who makes so much of his being weak. Actually, it demonstrates his contact with the spiritual (imaginative) sphere. "I felt sorry for her" is judged by society to be a weak explanation for not ditching an unfaithful wife. *He* knows that it is just such pity that distinguishes human values from animal ones.

Around him, sub-human values prevail. His court case is lost because the attorney for the plaintiff produces as evidence hotel sheets stained by bed-bugs. When he talks of mending his marriage, he adds that he is going to straighten out "this lousy bedbug mess, too". The image, of course, fits the man he is addressing and the marriage-bed this man has stained. Three hotels are involved—and three lives.

Arthur speaks of Joanie as a "grown child", one without powers of discrimination who pathetically imagines herself to have fine tastes and a good brain. Salinger confirms the estimate, partly by means of the few lines

he gives her to say, but mostly by means of what he tells us about her eyes. Only this feature of her appearance is described. "Her eyes", we are informed, "more just open than alert or speculative, reflected chiefly their own size and colour." These words stress the infantile, undeveloped nature of "the girl". And right at the opening of the story she has one eye shut. This eye is closed against the light, while the other eye is described as large and so blue as to be almost violet. Evidently, Salinger wishes us to know that her true self is still hidden below consciousness, on the "dark" side of her being. She has not learned to bear the direct light which would allow her to see things as they really are.[3]

"I mean she's a helluva good kid basically", Arthur explains in his hopeful mood. Without hearing that Arthur has called her an animal, she reacts to his first phone call by twice exclaiming that she feels like a *dog*. Basically, then, she has a moral sense; although, having no intelligence to guide her, her intuitive imagination remains cut off from her conscious will, making her seek love as a child seeks candy, greedily and blindly, from any one who will promise it.

Lee is admired by the girl who has not learned to use her eyes to see with, because he trims his hair to seem "distinguished-looking". (The quotes, as well as the epithet, are Salinger's.) Bearing the name of a gallant general, he is a strategist in guile. As he lies his hardest to prevent Arthur from coming over to his apartment, he uses the word *honestly* in every second sentence. He is riled when Arthur details Joanie's lack of taste and brains just as he is trying to look his best. But Salinger lets us observe that his most studied pose fails to impress the one it was intended for, since Joanie is a shade too slow to notice it. Obviously, he who deals in appearances cannot face the reality behind the contrived façade. He cuts short Arthur's reminder that Joanie finds "terribly attractive" even "the oldest, crummiest, greasiest——".

Lee loses the last battle when he meets the power of the imagination. Facts he is accustomed to control and manipulate in a world where no one troubles to distinguish between appearance and reality. What he cannot cope with is a truth that goes against the appearances. Knowing that Joanie is in bed with him, he can interpret Arthur's message that she has come home solely as a cunning lie to put him at a disadvantage. Is Arthur reserving his knowledge of the adultery to force him to make things right with "Junior"? Lee cannot tell, and Salinger has told the story in such a way that we cannot be sure, either. Perhaps Arthur has found a way to survive in the rat race, after all. But, if the poet in Arthur has won this battle, the victory over Lee

is nothing more than a by-product of a victory over the abnormality of New York life. Spiritually, Joanie has come home with the faith in the future that has been reborn in Arthur's mind, the phone calls having served as a cathartic exercise. He has been cut free from the "lousy bedbug mess." Earlier, Lee reproached him with being, for all his intelligence, "an absolute child". Yet this is exactly what the poet most truly is, an *absolute* child, absolute in his imaginative vision and intelligent too, as opposed to the "grown child" that Joanie is, adult in desires but unawakened to spiritual reality. In a neurotic society normality can be maintained solely through the poetic vision that joins intelligence to sensitivity. Ironically, Lee earlier had urged Arthur to use his imagination. He is caught short when Arthur does just that.

"The guy's obviously going through absolute——" Lee remarks to Joanie just before the phone rings for the second time. The word *hell* remains unspoken, maybe because Lee cannot face the fact that he is the chief architect of this particular hell or that his apparent concern is pure hypocrisy. Taking the call, however, he learns that Arthur has escaped from torment in a way that eludes him. Now, for the first time, he understands his own situation. Previously, Joanie had imagined her companion to be on fire. It was only cigarette ash. Joanie could never see very well with those big eyes of hers—not events in the physical world, anyway. As the story ends, the burning cigarette that Lee drops seems likely to set the bed on fire. Joanie wants to extinguish it, but he tells her "to just *sit still*, for Chrissake". If you are in hell, there is nothing to do except endure it passively, hopelessly. Was it not a poet who said that written over Hell's door was the inscription: "All hope abandon, ye who enter here"?

Hell *is* absolute for those who deal in appearances and have forgotten what children understand—that hope is born of truth viewed through the eyes of the imagination. The story preceding this one ("For Esmé—with Love and Squalor") features the quotation from Dostoevski's Father Zossima: "Fathers and teachers, I ponder 'What is hell?' I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love". The quotation shows that Salinger's suggestion of Lee burning in hell fire is by no means casual but fully intended. The quotation throws light also on Lee's use of the expletive "for Chrissake". Swearing, says Salinger's beloved creation Seymour Glass, is simply a low form of prayer. One cannot pray genuinely in hell, but one knows to whom prayer should be made. And as it is part of the misery of hell that one cannot pray, another part of the misery is the knowledge that others have access to the divine love and forgiveness. Arthur had concluded his message about his

new-found hope by saying that he was going to see Junior himself. This lets us see the extent of Arthur's hope and of Lee's despair. For Christ the Son of God is, in contemporary speech, quite accurately described by the name *Junior*.

NOTES

1. Little, Brown & Company, New York, 1953.
2. This character of Salinger's, who refuses to be called an animal, is called by his creator *Arthur*. It is possible to think that Arthur, admitting his material presence in the shabbiness of the twentieth-century, imaginatively links himself with King Arthur of another and more heroic age. Arthur and Guinevere—Arthur and Joanie: the human problem of the unfaithful wife is unaffected by time. The modern Arthur is royal in his love, and his youthful trip with Joanie to New Haven was specifically to *Princeton*. The casual use of this place-name by Salinger may not be intended to reinforce the King Arthur image, but it is just the kind of reference that Salinger employs so frequently to make his point. Puns are integral to the Salingeresque imagination.
3. For an examination of Salinger's use of colour symbolism see my discussion of "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" in *J. D. Salinger, A Critical Essay* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1967). In *Nine Stories*, Salinger seems to keep to a consistent scheme in which yellow represents the sensuous world and blue the spiritual or imaginative world. Green, a mixture of the two, thus stands for the union of the two worlds. In "Esmé—with Love and Squalor" the intelligent young brother of Esmé has "immense green eyes." Joanie's blue eyes (she is also described as watching Lee "rather like a young, blue-eyed Irish policeman") indicate her spiritual potential. Her lack of intelligence is shown by the violet tone, which is on the other side of blue from yellow. Only in Arthur's loving vision are her eyes green. In life they reflect only themselves, i.e. they do not mirror the actual world, so Joanie is both unintelligent and unobservant—the two effects spring from a single cause. Arthur's harsh judgment that her eyes are like "goddam sea shells" compares her to dead things separated from their natural element (the green sea), having only surface lustre. He hopes that she may change when she has a chance to develop her love for plants, the green and living products of the natural world.